[Radio]

Swenson New York Tales - [Anecdote?] - Life Histories

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On April 15, 1912, the unsinkable White Star Liner, S. S. Titanic, struck an iceberg and sank with a loss of 1500 lives off the icy grand banks. The radio operator, John George Phillips, sent the distress call— 'CQD DE MGY'. CQD was the then known international distress call. In later years it was changed to 'SOS'. I made record of this historical fact, because it was shortly after this major sea disaster, that I saw a radio transmitting and receiving set for the first time, and radio was to play an important part in my life.

One day while playing on Waverly Place with a chum, Ernie Hoch, we got acquainted with Teddy Osterwich, who lived at 115. Teddy had a licensed amateur radio station and invited us up to his house to look it over. On seeing the mysterious wires, I became fascinated by the strange contraption and from that time on, I sought to understand it. Parts for radio sets were too costly in those days for one of my meagre means. However, I wrote to all the radio manufacturers of that period for catalogues. With these I taught myself the names of the various parts and their purpose. A few days later, Teddy passed along the information that an antenna wire was available on the roof next to Ernie's house. The owner did not want it anymore. With a coil of rope we sallied forth on a great adventure. Going to the roof of Teddie's house five stories high, one end of the rope was secured to the knob of the roof door. Teddy began to make ready to lower himself, but I insisted on getting the wire myself and after spinning a yarn about how to climb down a rope, I crawled over the edge of the roof and...zipp!!..Before I knew what had happened, I had slid down two stories with my hands tightly holding the role landing in a pile of tangled wire on the next roof. The palms of my hands were raw and bleeding. The other two boys were looking and laughing at my misfortune.

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I gritted my teeth and made my way to the peak of the next roof in an effort to salvage the antenna. But after tugging for some time was unable to dislodge it. I gave up the attempt and climbed down to the street where I was met by Teddy who took me to his father's drug store and had my hands bandaged.

Always delving into the mystery of radio communication, I read all the text books on the subject that I could buy or borrow. Finally I bought enough parts for a sending and receiving outfit, from Raymond Blauvelt of Nyack for about eleven dollars. The transmitter consisted of a simple helix, small fixed spark gap, spark coil and key. The parts of the receiver were a primary loading coil, tuning coupler, variable condenser and a Galena detector with a hair of Baldwins head phones. Securing some copper wire, I put up the antenna connecting the lead-in to my attic room, where it was fixed up like a den. The table on which the apparatus was mounted, was made from packing boxes, the top covered with a piece of beaver board varnished to give it a finish. I had not received any license for the sending set, but in the meantime had mounted the receiver and every night practiced the code by copying the weather reports from the naval radio station 'NAA' at Arlington, Va.

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January 4, 1920, I became 19 years of age, and on March 10, 1920, secured my license as amateur radio operator, second grand. License number G-6135, with the call letters for the station designated as '2-LQ'. Once more I began in earnest to delve into the mysteries of radio communications.

The nearest amateur station was owned and operated by a man in South Nyack, call letters, 2-IS. Hearing him on the air one night, after my apparatus was hooked up, I gave him a call. He answered alright, 3 but he said my note was rotten, the signal was weak and wabbling all over the dial. A poor report to be sure, but to me it was just grand, the mere

fact that my transmitter had been heard was sufficient to make me feel equal to Marconi himself. At night I tinkered around in my attic room, always trying to improve the apparatus and dreaming of the day when I would become a commercial operator sailing ships on the high seas.

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Early in the month of December, due to a business slump, I was laid off by the Manhattan Electric Supply Company. From that time on, I loafed about town with two other boys. At night we gathered together in an old warehouse and talked for hours, while at the same time munching buns and drinking cold coffee. During one of these nightly talks, one of the boys became inspired with the idea of joining the marines. I seconded the motion, but when it came time to join up, the others backed out.

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On January 4, 1921, my 20th birthday, I journeyed to the recruiting station on East 23rd Street, and enlisted for a period of four years in the United States Marine Corps. With my traveling orders intact, I went aboard the SS City of Savannah in the afternoon, and within the hour the ship was underway for our destination, Savannah, Georgia. The trip was uneventful with fair weather all the way. On the afternoon of the 20th, the ship nosed its way slowly along the muddy Savannah River. This was the most interesting part of the trip. As the ship slowly passed by the lighthouse, the 'waving girl of Savannah' stepped outside and with a large white cloth kept waving it until the ship had passed by. There was a story of romance woven about this girl, now an old lady. It seems that many years ago, the waving girl had a sailor 4 sweetheart, so the story goes, and one day her sweetheart sailed away to sea on a long trip, it was agreed between them, that on his return he would watch for her, and she should wave to him with her handkerchief. Her sweetheart never returned, and down through the years this girl continued to wave to every passing ship, thinking perhaps her lover might be on board, until today her faith has become a tradition.

At ten o'clock that night the ship docked, and gathered my baggage together, I left the ship and hailed a typical southern coach, piloted by an old darkie who drove me to the Hotel De Sota.

The next morning, January 21, I entrained at Savannah and late the same afternoon arrived at Port Royal, South Carolina, where I was taken in tow by a marine sergeant, who asked for my orders, and then escorted me to the waiting launch at the wharf. I was assigned to battalion 'B' of the Recruit Depot, where, for the next two months, I was put through rigorous and greulling training. Arriving at the Recruit Depot, I was first taken to the military barbers, where my hair was cropped close, next my photograph, then the necessary inoculations for typhoid. After all these things, the commanding officer delivered a lecture on just how to become a good marine, what to do, what not to do, and the penalty for any disobedience of orders. Then the recruits were marched over to the quartermasters store rooms, where clothes, and equipment were issued. And last but not least, we were placed in the gentle care of the hard boiled corporals and sergeants of the training camp, who lost no time in putting us through the paces.

At five o'clock in the morning we were routed out of bed and lined up outside the barracks, if it so happened a recruit failed to snap out of his bunk at the first call, the corporal just dumped the bunk upside down. Outside shivering in the chilly dawn, the recruits 5 with eyes still only half open, were given an oral schooling, the non-coms snapped out questions such as, what is a captain's insignia? How many stars for a brigade commander, and so on, and so forth, etc. After first call and the formation outside, there were setting up exercises. Then the recruits returned to the barracks, made up bunks according to regulations, and waited for chow call to sound breakfast. After chow, there were various drills with and without the rifle, schooling on seamanship, then we were marched to the rifle range where experts taught us how to make a good score with the rifle and pistol. I became gun-shy on the range and found great difficulty in trying to make good scores. The instructors were not the least bit gentle in their efforts to make me qualify. The marine method is hard, but they do turn out fine shots. They talked, shouted, jammed my arm

in the sling and even kicked my elbow, under me, until it was in the correct position. They were insistent in saying I would have to qualify before I left the range. I did. I made marksman the first two years and sharpshooter the last two of the cruise.

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March 15, 1921, I was transferred to the Marine Corps Training School for radio telegraphers and visual signal men and was attached to the school detachment. September 1st, transferred to headquarters detachment at the main station. continuing my studies at the school while maintaining a 'striker' watch at the Naval Radio Station, NAV, on the island. On November 15, graduated from the Radio School receiving a diploma signed by the commanding general, E. K. Cole. I was then assigned to the Naval Radio Station for duty as regular operator. A gunnery sergeant was in charge of the radio shack, and the four marine watch operators. Our sleeping quarters were adjacent to the operating room, and this convenience certainly was worth its weight in gold to 6 the operator being routed out of a warm bed to go on watch, let us say at four o'clock in the morning — all that was necessary to do, was for the operator to pull on a pair of trousers and slippers, walk a few steps from one room to the other and he was on duty. The hours of duty consisted of four hours on and eight hours off duty with every third day off for twenty four hours.

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A few weeks after I had been assigned to standing regular watches, it so happened I was on duty in the wee hours of the morning, a time when radio traffic wave lengths were practically clear of business and most operators dosed. I likewise slumped in the chair in sleepy contentment. In an instant, however, I snapped to attention, as through the ether on the distress frequency '600 meters', I heard the high shrill note of a transmitter from some ship sending 'SOS' SOS SOS'. As I listened, the distress call seemed to form a picture in my mind of three dots, three black dashes and three red dots. This was the

international radio signal for help and correct reception and prompt assistance, would mean either life or death to those in distress. All these things rapidly passed through my mind as I made ready to copy the ship's position. As soon as the vessel in distress had signed off, I listened for a few moments to see if any other station would answer. Hearing no other station reply, I called the coast guard cutter Yamacraw, docked at Savannah. After a few calls the cutter answered, and I passed on the information I had copied. The cutter immediately got underway and proceeded to the assistance of the 'SS Asche'. The freighter ASCHE had struck a reef in the Bahamas and was held fast with practically her whole bottom sheared off. Days later, Merritt and Chapman tugs salvaged the ship and towed it to Norfolk, using compressed air to keep the 7 ship afloat.

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In the month of December, 1921, while working a French steamer by radio, copying 'TR', position reports, I thought it would be fun talking in French to the operator on the ship. I asked some harmless questions, such as, the tonnage of the vessel, etc., etc., of course I was well aware of the fact that it was against naval regulations, to use other than strict naval procedure. However, this unofficial conversation was copied by the operator on the Flagship at Charleston, S. C., whose duty it was to list all discrepancies. A few days later I was called before the 'mast' by the commanding officer, who asked for an explanation. There was nothing to do but to tell the truth, consequently I was severely reprimanded, and punished by being sentenced to the Marine Brigg for a period of three days, in solitary confinement on bread and water. On entering the cell, I asked the sergeant where the bed and blankets were. He said, what the hell do you think this is, a hotel? Get in there and shut up. It was very cold in this steel cell, with a floor and walls of steel and no heat.

I was allowed to have a pitcher of water and a quarter of a loaf of bread. Three times a day, nothing else to eat. From five o'clock in the morning until after sunset, there was nothing to do except stand. It was too cold to sit on the floor, and the bed clothes were removed at daybreak. The men in the other cells kept yelling and creating a disturbance

for some kind of heat, until finally the guards placed an oil stove just outside each cell. The only way I could get any benefit from the stove was to kneel down in the corner of the cell and place my hands outside the bars. Being in solitary, I was not permitted to smoke, nevertheless, every noontime 8 a friendly cellmate left a cigarette butt and a piece of match lodged in a small opening just above the lock on the door, so that in spite of regulations I had a short smoke most every day. After three days I was returned to duty, and thereafter was more careful to observe orders.

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One morning at four o'clock while on duty at the main gate, one of the civilian electricians came along on his bicycle with a small bag of insulators, which he had picked up from the ground where an old house had been torn down. He asked permission to leave the base, and although our orders were to permit nobody to leave government property with a package without the proper authority, these insulators I thought were practically worthless, and had been discarded anyhow, so I let him go. At this time unfortunately, the government intelligence service was trying to track down a gang who were stealing valuable equipment from the base. Detectives were laying in wait outside the base. I was duely relieved and was asleep in the guard house a couple hours later when I was roughly awakened. The judge advocate stood over my bunk and asked point blank if I had let the electrician out of the base without a pass. I said, yes, and was immediately placed under arrest and tried by another deck court martial. This time I was sentenced for neglect of duty to 15 days in the naval brigg and a loss of 15 days pay.

On entering the brigg the warden took my money and cigarettes. My clothes were looked up and I was issued a white gob suit. Regulations were strict in the brigg, at 5 o'clock in the morning we arose, took a shower bath, washed our clothes, placed them in the dryer, then proceeded to our respective duties. My job was to swab 9 the deck six times a day. After breakfast, we were given a half hour's airing in the court yard, marching in couples with bracelets on, with an armed guard stationed at each corner of the yard. After the

morning exercise, we were permitted one smoke, the tobacco was obtained from what was known as the “smoking locker,” and each man had to roll his own. I used to roll my cigarette the size of a cigar in order to get a good long smoke. Once a week by attending church services in the brigg, we were permitted another after the services. Of course everybody went to church. It was so irksome being confined day after day, when not swabbing decks, I paced up and down in the big cage with some of the other prisoners. I met all kinds of men. One fellow, a chief petty officer, was up on charges of sodomy. I talked with him at length on this subject and found he actually thought one method was as good as another. One other inmate gave me pointers on how to make a living by being a fake beggar, a deaf mute, or even having one's arm done up in a sling as he had done. Every other morning, my commanding officer stopped in to see if I was well taken care of and to inquire if I was in need of anything. Each time he came I asked for a decent cake of soap, but never got it. At the end of my 15 days, and upon being officially released from the brigg, I left in a hurry and didn't look back once.